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AUTHOR Miller, Michael T.; Vacik, Stephen M.
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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed graduate programs of Higher Education Administration within the Southeastern United States in order to identify programs perceived to be "excellent" and to profile their predominant characteristics. A 10-item survey instrument was developed and mailed to the program director, chair, or coordinator at all Southeastern higher education graduate programs as identified in the Association for the Study of Higher Education directory. A final response rate was 79 percent or 22 institutions. The resulting data, including a self-ranking among participants of the top programs, provided a cross-section of program characteristics in the region and a perceived standard of excellence in these graduate programs. Virtually all programs offered a Doctor of Education degree and some form of Master's degree. Most programs were relatively small in comparison to their counter-parts in humanities and other areas of education. The publication records of faculty suggested that scholarship was important. Only half of all programs offered some form of graduate student organization. Those programs that respondents ranked as the top three were those at the University of Georgia, Florida State University, and the University of Virginia. Concerns emerging from the study were high student-to-faculty ratios and possible over-reliance on adjunct and part-time faculty. (Contains 13 references.) (JB)

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The Search for Quality: The Status of Higher Education Programs in the Southeast

Michael T. Miller
Assistant Professor
Higher Education Administration Program
University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-1170
FAX: (205) 348-2161

Stephen M. Vacik
Research Assistant
Higher Education Administration Program
University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-9211

Running Head: Southeastern Higher Education

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Abstract

The following study surveyed graduate programs of Higher Education Administration within the Southeastern United States. The resulting data, including a self-ranking among participants of the top programs, provides a cross-section of program characteristics in the region and a perceived standard of excellence in these graduate programs.

The study of higher education has been an area of increased attention in recent years, as issues of public accountability and role and mission have surfaced on many fronts. Lodged within this investigation has been the purpose of higher education graduate programs; those programs whose primary focus has traditionally been the preparation of administrators to work in higher education institutions. While the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) has been a leader in the examination of higher education graduate programs, the creation of the Council for the Advancement of Programs who study Higher Education at the 1995 ASHE conference seems to indicate the need for self-study within this community.

Higher education as a field of study has been largely reliant on Dressel and Mayhew's (1974) work for self-definition and self-direction. And although Fife and Goodchild's (1991) work further defined and defended higher education as a field of study, relatively few efforts have been directed at the programs themselves and their efforts. The absence of an accrediting body may in part be a cause of this, as is the growing attention to research methodologies and the need for the study of issues within higher education institutions and systems.

With the exception of Keim's (1983) work over a decade ago, no attention has been given to the identification of "excellent" programs in the study of higher education. Similarly, little scholarly attention has focused on the characteristics of these programs. Subsequently, the purpose for conducting the current

study was to identify the perceived "excellent" programs in higher education in the Southeastern United States, and to profile their predominant characteristics related to students and faculty. Findings directed at this two-fold purpose will provide important understandings on the state of the preparation of future higher education administrators.

Background of the Study

Higher education administration programs have been seen as an effective mechanism for developing practitioners to work at various levels of postsecondary education. These programs have been so effective that Keim (1995) noted that a number of graduate programs have now also become active in planning for the professional development of community college administrators. This entrepreneurial spirit may at least be part of the driving force which has made higher education into "an American comparative advantage on which we can build in our knowledge-based global economy" (Groennings, 1989, p. 1).

One perception of higher education programs is that of a traditional graduate program where scholarship and the teaching of theory are paramount to program and institutional mission (Hobbs & Francis, 1973). The alternative and perhaps more common view of higher education programs is that of preparing administrators for the world of work within the academic community (Crosson & Nelson, 1986).

In the second type of program, students are recruited to enroll on primarily a part-time basis and are involved in action research directed at best or improving practice. These programs are consistently faced with curriculum issues (Townsend, 1995; Miller & Nelson, 1994), the use of adjunct and part-time faculty (Crosson & Nelson, 1986), emphasis on research as opposed to teaching, and the cultural constructs which form a "hidden curriculum" in and around higher education programs (Townsend, 1995). While these general issues have been somewhat explored by the higher education program community, relatively little attention has been focused on the practical information of faculty-student ratios, scholarly production, and acceptance rates.

Despite the lack of profile data on higher education programs, these graduate experiences have been studied from the perspective of marketing analyses and student expectations (Grace & Fife, 1986). This examination revealed that the high demand for "students trained for administrative tasks" (p. 17) dictates careful study of students, curriculum, and program inputs and outcomes. Additionally, Grace and Fife advocated a responsive experience based on student needs, rather than the thinking proposed by Rosenblum (1985) which advocates participative curriculum development and planning.

In addition to calls for joint program development and evaluation, literature rooted in the field of adult education has suggested that program coordinators serve as conduits for the

creation of a curriculum which is both responsive and responsible (Sork & Buskey, 1986).

Procedures

A ten-item research-developed survey instrument was developed for use in the study. The instrument was based on the work of Miller and Dirkx (1995) and their examination of mentoring in adult education graduate programs. The instrument contained five items addressing program demographics, a multi-dimensional question on the use and function of a graduate student organization, and three questions about program acceptance rates. All of these items requested categorical responses. The final question was open-ended and asked the respondent to rate, in order of perceived excellence, the top five graduate programs in higher education in the Southeastern United States.

The instrument was adapted based on the input of graduate students and faculty in a higher education graduate program. The instrument was examined for face validity and was assumed to be comprehensive and reliable. Additionally, the instrument was validated by program planners in higher education, and was deemed appropriate for the nature of the study.

The sample for the study included all higher education graduate programs in the Southeastern United States. These programs were identified in the Association for the Study of Higher Education directory, and through consultation with an

existing data base of faculty in higher education. The surveys were mailed to each program's director, chair, or coordinator. No extrapolation was made for masters or doctoral programs, resulting in an overall profile of graduate programs.

Results

Utilizing three follow-up mailings, a final response rate of 82 percent was achieved (n=23). One of the questionnaires, however, was not completed, and indicated the program was no longer operational. Thus, a 79 percent usable response rate (n=22) was achieved, and this was determined to be acceptable for the current research.

Program Data: Six questions were related to the structure and characteristics of the higher education graduate programs being studied. The items examined degrees offered, number of faculty and students, faculty publication records, assistantships offered, and program acceptance rates.

Programs were found to offer a variety of degree options. Over 90 percent of the responding programs (n=20) offered the doctor of education degree, and 45 percent of the respondents (r=10) reported offering a master of education degree. The same percentage reported offering a doctor of philosophy degree (see Table 1). Few respondents claimed that their program offers an educational specialists degree (n=3).

Nearly all programs represented in the data employed six or fewer full-time faculty (n=20). Approximately the same number

(n=17) of part-time or adjunct faculty were reported in use in the responding programs (see Table 2). While no program had more than 10 full-time faculty, one respondent reported use of 11 or more part-time or adjunct faculty for research or service.

Programs varied in size of student bodies. One program's coordinator indicated that fewer than 25 students were enrolled on a full- and part-time basis. Alternatively, eight respondents (40 percent) indicated a total of over 75 full- and part-time students currently enrolled in their higher education programs. Nearly as many (n=7) enrolled 51 to 75 students, and half as many (n=4) enrolled 25 to 50 students (see Table 3).

Faculty publication is believed to be an important component of graduate education. As such, respondents were asked to indicate the average number of publications for each full-time faculty member during the past year (inclusive of referred, non-referred, books, monographs, etc.). While three surveys had missing data on this item, thirteen (68 percent) coordinators reported an average of three or fewer publications for each full-time faculty member (see Table 4). Five coordinators (26 percent) reported four-to-six publications per full-time faculty member, and one program (5 percent) respondent indicated seven or more publications for each full-time faculty member.

Most of the responding graduate programs offered assistantships to their students. Although many of these programs do not typically rely on full-time students (Fife & Goodchild, 1991), those who do enroll on a full-time basis are

often in greater need of financial assistance and professional development experiences. Five program coordinators reported offering one-to-three graduate assistantships, eight respondents offer four-to-six assistantships, and four programs offer seven or more assistantships (see Table 5).

Higher education programs typically combine professional development functions with scholarly training. As such, admissions criteria and acceptance rates can vary based on a number of factors, such as test scores, professional work experience, writing experiences, etc. For the sample institutions, the majority of respondents (doctoral programs n=8; masters programs n=7) accepted over 80 percent of program applicants (see Table 6).

Student Organization Data: Half of the respondents (n=11) reported offering a formal graduate student organization through their department or academic program. Three of the respondents provided the written comment that the university community offered opportunities for involvement, and subsequently they believed that offering an organization through their department would be a duplication of resources. In these organizations, 80 percent of the respondents indicated that under 50 students were active, 50 percent allowed only students admitted to their particular program of study, and 90 percent indicated that the organization had input into departmental decision making. The majority of organizations (n=8) reported offering services to off-campus students.

Respondents indicated that these student organizations offer a wide variety of activities, including: social events (n=11), brown bag lunches (n=7), career advancement activities (n=7), discussion groups (n=7), publications (n=7), seminars (n=5) lectures (n=4), and research support (n=4). Of the publications, most (n=8) published a student newsletter, while others published a student directory (n=1) or an alumni directory (n=1). Respondents also indicated that their student organization offered comprehensive examination study groups, an orientation to the program, and provided support to attend conferences. The majority of student organizations were reported to be in existence up to five years (n=6), while one was five to ten years old, and four organizations were over 11 years old.

Excellent Program Data: In an attempt to at least partially replicate Keim's (1983) work on a regional basis, respondents were asked to list, in order, what they believed to be the best higher education graduate programs in the Southeastern United States. For a rating of number one, the program was assigned five points, a rating of two was assigned four points, a rating of three was assigned three points, a rating of four was assigned two points, and a rating of five was assigned one point.

Of the 22 respondents, one provided no listing, and two provided a listing of programs in "no particular order," and these responses were subsequently not utilized in tabulating final results. The graduate program in higher education at the University of Georgia was believed to be the best in the region,

obtaining four first place votes (45 overall points). Florida State University's graduate program had three first place votes and earned 40 points overall. The University of Virginia's graduate program also had four first place votes and 38 overall points (see Table 7).

Discussion

Higher education as a field of study has evolved markedly during the past three decades. The sophistication of programs now provide specializations in college student affairs, community college leadership, administration, and in some instances, non-profit management. Despite these emphases and growth of higher education graduate programs, relatively little is known about their operations, structure, and governance. Due in part to the lack of an accrediting body, these graduate-level programs have been able to exist without comprehensive understanding. The current study was viewed as an attempt to begin this understanding, and to identify which programs are perceived to be excellent. Excellent programs, in turn, can be used as bench-marks for program improvement, teaching, and faculty development.

As might be expected, virtually all of the programs involved in this study offered the Doctor of Education (Ed.D) degree and some form of master's degree. Realizing that the Ed.D. has typically been seen as a practitioners degree, this finding rings consistent with the work of Fife and Goodchild (1991) who took

the perspective of higher education programs training administrators. Also, the fact that nearly half of the programs responding offer a Doctor of Philosophy is refreshing in that research and perpetuating the academic community is being supported. The large number of master's degrees being offered also seems to indicate a strong interest in administration as a profession.

Most programs in the Southeast were found to be relatively small in comparison to their counter-parts in the humanities and in other divisions of education. The reliance on part-time and adjunct faculty may be one reason for the small faculty sizes. The solid publication records of those teaching in these programs leads to the conclusion that scholarship is important and that the higher education community is active in pursuing research and research dissemination activities. This research is conducted even with a high student to faculty ratio.

Somewhat disheartening was the fact that only half of all graduate programs offered a formal graduate student organization. In light of the student to faculty ratio, student organizations may prove to be helpful in providing mentoring-type relationships among students. These organizations appeared active, offering lectures, seminars, social events, etc., and from the relative youth of the organizations, the recent movement in creating student organizations is encouraging.

As for the perceived "excellent" graduate programs in higher education, the top three have held prominent reputations

nationally. The University of Georgia has long been seen as a national leader in providing graduate education in higher education, as have Florida State University and the University of Virginia. With a diverse geographic representation from throughout the Southeast, it can be concluded that there are many centers of excellence in graduate preparation.

Conclusions

Higher education will continue to be a dynamic area of study, whether for academic or professional preparation. The growth of community college leadership programs now seems to be paralleling the growth of college student affairs programs of twenty years ago. And although these programs appear to be functional and vital centers for research, there are two areas of concern: student-to-faculty ratios and the reliance on adjunct and part-time faculty.

The student to faculty ratio indicated by respondents suggests between of 10 and 15 students for each full-time faculty member. At the graduate level, when courses tend to be intense and reliant on mentoring type relationships, a 10-to-15 student responsibility may be too high. Dissertation advising, clinical supervisions, and advising may be inhibited due to such a high number. Additionally, with publication increasingly important for graduate faculty, responsibility for up to 15 students may prove to be excessive and may compromise the graduate school "experience." This may be part of the reason why

graduate student organizations are increasing, and if this true, then faculty in these programs are to be lauded for their resourcefulness and commitment to mentoring the graduate student.

Another result of high student-to-faculty ratios may be the use of adjunct or part-time faculty. While these faculty are typically selected carefully, their commitment and availability to students may at times be strained due to geographic distances, time schedules, research and professional interests, etc. Should the use of part-time faculty continue, then the burden falls increasingly on the program coordinator or department chair to provide meaningful orientations and teaching assistance to these faculty. The part-time faculty member must understand the relationship of a single course to the overall program, and must be intimately knowledgeable of the "hidden curriculum" of the particular graduate program.

In a time of scarce resource management, bench-marking with programs such as those at the University of Georgia and Florida State University becomes an increasingly important activity. For higher education institutions to become more accountable to themselves and to the interests of their various constituencies, comprehensive academic program planning must become part of their common routines. This planning, however, must take into account not only immediate needs, but the student needs of mentoring and change. Only in effective planning and feedback can higher education graduate programs replicate their success of the past several decades.

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Table 1

Degrees Offered by Higher Education Programs

Degree	Frequency (N=22)	Percentage of Respondents
Master of Education	10	45%
Master of Science	3	14
Master of Arts	7	32
Doctor of Education	20	91
Doctor of Philosophy	10	45
Education Specialists	3	14

Table 2

Number of Full and Part-time/Adjunct Faculty in Higher Education Programs

Number of Faculty	Full-Time	Part-Time/Adjunct
1-3 faculty members	8	8
4-6 faculty members	12	9
7-10 faculty members	2	2
11 or more faculty members	0	1

Table 3

Full and Part-time Student Enrollment

Number of Students	Frequency (N=20)	Percentage of Respondents
Under 25 students	1	5%
25 to 50 students	4	20
51 to 75 students	7	35
Over 75 students	8	40

Table 4

Faculty Publication Averages

Number of Publications	Frequency (N=19)	Percentage of Respondents
3 or less	13	68%
4 to 6	5	26
7 or more	1	5

Table 5

Number of Assistantships Offered by Program

Number of Assistantships	Frequency (N=17)	Percentage of Respondents
1 to 3	5	29%
4 to 6	8	47
7 or more	4	23

Table 6

Program Acceptance Rates

Acceptance Rate	Doctoral Program (N=19)	Masters Program (N=13)
Under 40%	4	0
41 to 60%	4	3
61 to 79%	3	3
Over 80%	8	7

Table 7

Rank Order of Perceived Excellent Higher Education Graduate Programs

Program	First Place Votes (N=19)	Overall Rating in Points	Rank
University of Georgia	4	45	1
Florida State University	3	40	2
University of Virginia	4	38	3
University of South Carolina	2	20	4
University of Florida	1	18	5
University of Memphis	2	18	5
University of Alabama	0	11	7
University of North Carolina	1	7	8
North Carolina State University	1	6	9
Virginia Tech University	0	5	10
University of Arkansas-Little Rock	1	5	10

*Of the 22 respondents, three did not respond to this section of the survey.